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SUBJECT Espionage

ROBERT MACNEIL: First tonight we return to the escalating dispute between London and Moscow over espionage. Last Thursday, in a major coup, Britain announced the defection of Moscow's top spy in London, Oleg Gordievski. The British expelled 25 Soviet diplomats and journalists as spies. Moscow responded by expelling 25 British citizens. And today London retaliated by kicking out six more. The British said Gordievski had identified all of them as spies.

To look further at the story, we have George Carver, senior fellow at the Georgetown University Center for Strategic and International Studies. Mr. Carver spent 26 years with the CIA, was their top man in Germany, and had extensive experience with situations like this.

Mr. Carver, first of all today's news. Six more expulsions out of the Soviet personnel in London, a total embassy staff of 210. Would that likely to be all the Soviet people, on past performance, out of an embassy staff, who would be engaging in some form of intelligence-gathering?

GEORGE CARVER: Oh, no. The actual number would be considerably larger than that. This is basically the ping-pong ball bouncing back and forth. General Secretary Gorbachev took a very hard line on this, much harder than he took -- than was taken with Great Britain in 1971, or France in 1983. And essentially, he told Prime Minister Thatcher to stick it in her ear. And she is a very tough lady and a very strong Prime Minister, and she has indicated her displeasure at their action. And this is going to unfold for two or three more rounds before it's over.

MACNEIL: You mean she could have, assuming that the proportions of Soviet embassy staff, on past performance, engaged in espionage held true, she could have expelled a whole lot more on good grounds.

CARVER: The Soviets have a total presence in London, not all of them accredited diplomats, of something on the order of 220, of whom probably at least half have various intelligence-related functions, and probably three-quarters perform intelligence duties from time to time.

So, if Margaret Thatcher wants to continue to play this game, she's got a lot of balls to draw on. She's got the problem that there are about twice as many Soviets in London as there are British subjects in Moscow. And if the exchange continues even, General Secretary Gorbachev has more chips on the table than she, so he's liable to run her out because she's playing against the bank.

MACNEIL: Just to be fair about this, the British said today that none of the 25 British citizens the Soviets kicked out were spies. But is it likely that the Soviets would have had the goods on some of them?

CARVER: Relatively unlikely. Again, I don't know in detail. And if I were, I wouldn't be talking on PBS about it. But the British can be fairly sure that what the Soviets' chief officer in the United Kingdom, the resident of the KGB residentura (?), told them was authentic. If the Soviets' KGB, particularly on their home turf, is extremely efficient and had they known that any of these 25 Britons were engaged in espionage, they would have probably done something about it long ago.

So I think they just took 25 names off the list and said, "Out."

MACNEIL: How important is the defection of Oleg Gordievski?

CARVER: Well, it's enormously important. You can't compare apples, oranges and cumquats and say which is better. But it certainly is on a par with the Penkovsky case of a couple of decades ago.

To my off-hand recollection, never before has a KGB officer of that seniority, the man who was in charge of all Soviet intelligence activities in a major country -- in this case, Great Britain -- worked for the West and thrown in his lot with the West. He could have told us, or presumably has been telling British colleagues or friends, every Soviet operation of

any consequence in Great Britain, not just intelligence collection, but maneuvering in Parliament, maneuvering with the media, disinformation, political action, covert action, etcetera, etcetera, and could have given an absolutely priceless haul, first to British, and then presumably, in due course, to U.S., Western, and NATO, intelligence

MACNEIL: Now, the British say that he actually defected in July. Does that mean that they pretty well pumped him dry by now, would you think?

CARVER: Not necessarily. More and more, it's beginning to look as if he technically defected, in the sense of left the residentura never to return, in July. But it's looking as if he has been working with the British, and possibly even the Danes for a while, for the better part of two decades.

If so, in professional terms, full marks to my British friends and former colleagues.

MACNEIL: But if he made that decision two months ago, wouldn't the Soviets have been instantly alerted, and wouldn't they have immediately taken countermeasures, like pulling agents out or protecting them, and things like that?

CARVER: Well, everything here begins to get a little fuzzy, Robin. And I think it quite properly should be so, so far as what's in the public domain.

Some people say two months ago. I think that there are other grounds for believing that he actually left the embassy only a couple of weeks ago, although he may have agreed to do it. These things take time to plan. And I think one reason that the British did want to be quiet about it for a little while before they made it public is they wanted to take appropriate steps to sequester or keep under very close surveillance any British subjects whose activities on behalf of the Soviet Union Gordievski could have told them about, and not give them a chance to flee for the Channel as soon as it hit the public press.

MACNEIL: What would the time frame be? I mean how quickly would they have to move and how much get out of Gordievski in how much time in order to be effective once he'd decided?

CARVER: Well, the half-life of effective counterintelligence operations of this kind, or information, is very short. But they would have had to be prepared to move almost instantaneously to keep a very close eye on people whom he identified as working for the Soviet Union, but do so in a way that didn't violate their civil rights or produce grounds for a court suit, etcetera. Now, that would have had to have been done almost

immediately. Shutting down other major nets that the Soviets had running in Great Britain could have taken a little bit longer. But the imperative for moving quickly against British subjects who had a right to travel and to get out of the country, go take, ostensibly, a holiday in France, for example, as Burgess and Maclean did when they defected to Moscow many years ago, those moves would have had to be made extremely quickly before any public knowledge of Gordievski's having left the residentura, let alone possibly defected to the United Kingdom, before there was any public circulation of that kind of knowledge.

MACNEIL: If the British had been working him as a double agent for a long time, wouldn't he have told them years ago -- or, however, a long time ago -- all the stuff that he knew?

CARVER: Well, he would have tried to keep them apprised as he was working. But you've got to remember, Robin, that contacting and staying in contact with a senior KGB officer is technically and professionally a very tricky operation. And I would imagine that his British friends and the people with whom he was working absolutely relished and found absolutely captivating the chance to really sit down with him and talk to him for 15 minutes, let alone a couple of hours, let alone a few days, instead of having to communicate clandestinely or by very short messages, every one of which put his security at further risk.

MACNEIL: Is it likely that a man in his position would have known anything about Soviet activities in this country?

CARVER: Well, it depends on which position you're talking about. But prior to becoming the head of the residentura in London, he worked in Denmark. And he also, apparently, in KGB headquarters in Dzhershinsky Square at Lubianka, worked on illegals. Illegals being Soviets who go abroad not under diplomatic protection, but under false identities. And working on illegals, the chances are high that he worked on illegals in what the Soviets call their main enemy, which is the United States.

So in that sense, among others, he could provide us with priceless information, as well as the British.

MACNEIL: What kind of life will he be able to lead now? Will his life, for instance, be in danger?

CARVER: Well, that's putting it mildly. He will have to lead a very circumspect life. If he has not already been tried for treason and condemned to death in absentia, he certainly will be within the next week or two in an in-camera proceeding. And the KGB -- it may take them five years, it may

take them ten, it may take them 20, it may take them 25, but they will try very hard to carry out that death decree of a Soviet court, just as they have done with other major people who are regarded as a threat to the Soviet state. The most notable, of course, beig Leon Trotsky.

Well, thank you very much, Mr. Carver.